

By **DANIEL DE VISE** | February 20, 2011

8 Big Ideas for Improving Higher Ed

It's not "broken," so you could argue that it doesn't need to be "fixed."

The fact is, America's higher education system is still widely regarded as the best in the world. And that reputation certainly fits the nation's top research universities and liberal arts colleges, those with swelling endowments and shrinking admission rates.

But this vaunted reputation -- which draws students from all over the globe -- also masks what can only be described as some major flaws: spiraling tuition and fees. Yawning "graduation gaps" between students of different racial and ethnic categories. And nagging questions about how much today's college students actually learn.

We take a look at eight big problems facing the academy and, aided by some of its greatest minds, offer up some big ideas to help solve them.

So, while it may not be broken, why not perfect it?

1. Measure how much students learn at every college

A mere decade ago, few colleges had any objective means to measure how much their students learned between enrollment and graduation.

American higher education rested on its laurels, secure in its reputation as the best in the world, a credential based largely on the achievement of a few hundred national universities and selective liberal arts schools.

Slowly but surely, the accountability movement, along with rising concern that we're no longer the best, have breached the ivory tower.

The 2001 arrival of a federal mandate for student proficiency in

K-12 education, No Child Left Behind, compelled serious discussion of standardized testing in American universities. A 2000 report by the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education had graded every state "incomplete" for evidence of student learning. In 2006, a commission empaneled by the George W. Bush administration flirted with the idea of proposing a collegiate "No Child" law.

"We don't know whether our graduating students know more than the freshmen," said Richard Vedder, an Ohio University economist who participated in the 2006 report. "We don't know if they know more than they did 20 years ago."

Sensing a sea change, the higher education community responded with something approaching a national effort to measure student learning. In 2007, two organizations representing more than 500 public universities (and 70 percent of U.S. bachelor's degrees) launched a Voluntary System of Accountability. They encouraged member schools to choose among three standardized tests that offer comparable measurements of critical thinking. Other, smaller alliances followed.

More than 500 institutions have participated in the Collegiate Learning Assessment, the most popular of the new tests. The test and its competitors, the Collegiate Assessment of Academic Proficiency and the Proficiency Profile, generally attempt to measure the reasoning skills of students at a particular college, how they stack up against students at other schools, and what they have learned between freshman and senior years.

The other key product of the

accountability movement is the National Survey of Student Engagement, a decade-old initiative that attempts to measure whether a college is a rich learning environment, including powerful new data on how much time students spend engaged in study. More than 600 colleges participate annually.

Proponents of the accountability movement envision a time when the assessments are so pervasive, and so public, that the annual college rankings by U.S. News & World Report, Forbes and their ilk include data on student learning -- something they measure now only indirectly, through such metrics as graduation rate and student-faculty ratio.

"We're forced to do the rankings using second-rate, third-rate measures," said Vedder, who oversees the Forbes rankings, "because there are no first-rate measures."

Student learning data might become a part of every college guidebook and find-a-college Web site.

Many college leaders remain staunchly opposed to standardized testing, arguing that colleges are more intellectually diverse than high schools, and that no standardized test can measure their product.

"I think standardized tests at the collegiate level are anti-intellectual," said Patricia McGuire, president of Trinity Washington University.

Some critics also complain that the tests' focus on rating the school rather than the individual gives students little incentive to score well.

There is also concern about publishing scores, a step that might lead some colleges to abandon testing or, worse, turn away disadvantaged students to raise their

numbers.

“You introduce some perverse incentives when you start making the information public,” said Alexander McCormick, director of the student-engagement survey.

Any federal effort to require standardized testing in colleges would launch a rhetorical battle for the ages. Reformers suggest an alternative: Accreditors, whose academic reviews are key to a school’s survival, could require colleges to publish proof of student learning as a condition for accreditation.

“Instead of people saying, ‘You can’t do this,’ now the conversation is about how you do this, and I think that’s very positive,” said Roger Benjamin, president of the Council for Aid to Education, which administers the Collegiate Learning Assessment.

2. End merit aid

Few policy leaders would seriously propose eliminating financial aid based on academic merit, an essential variable in today’s competitive college-admissions marketplace.

Yet, critics deride merit aid as affirmative action for the wealthy, a system that increases access for students who can afford college without it.

“There are colleges where the average price paid by rich kids is lower than the average price paid by poor kids, and the reason is merit aid,” said Sandy Baum, an independent policy analyst.

Thirty years ago, merit aid was the rare scholarship to the extraordinary student, the vestige of an era when smart people might not go to college without a cash incentive.

Today, many upper-income families enter the college search with an expectation of merit aid. They shop for colleges as they would for cars, weighing offers from rival schools, haggling with admissions officers, effectively auctioning off a star student to the highest bidder.

Private colleges dispense merit aid at a rate of \$2,060 per student, while public colleges spend \$410 per student, according

to College Board data

It’s natural that families would shop around: The sticker price at top private colleges can exceed \$50,000 a year in tuition and living expenses, beyond the reach of the middle class.

But merit dollars are spent, by and large, on students who would go to college, anyway. A middle-class student denied merit aid by a \$50,000-a-year college might not be able to afford that college, but he or she can still afford college.

Merit aid favors the wealthy: Children from affluent families tend to have greater “merit,” in the form of higher grades and test scores.

Less-selective colleges leverage merit dollars to attract tuition-paying students and fill seats. More-selective schools offer merit aid to lure top students who raise the schools’ academic standing. Winners of the bidding wars lose tuition money that might otherwise be spent on teaching or on students with need. Merit discounts inflate the tuition charged to those who pay full price.

“Every dollar that we spend on merit aid as opposed to need-based aid is wasted,” said Douglas Bennett, president of Earlham College in Indiana.

A small group of elite, well-endowed colleges have resisted merit aid, awarding aid solely for need. Some schools promise to meet the full need of students with aid, so that no one -- in theory -- is priced out.

There are arguments for merit aid. Merit scholarships are popular among donors who want to reward hard work. Some merit-based programs steer students into high-demand fields.

But critics of merit aid say there is no compelling reason for colleges to court high-performing students save collegiate rankings, a pursuit scores of college presidents publicly disavow.

If college is becoming unaffordable, the reformers say, all the more reason to award aid dollars to those in need.

Jamie Merisotis, chief executive of the Lumina Founda-

tion, suggests colleges be urged to incorporate “some form of need” into all financial aid awards.

Baum suggests the best way to curb merit aid would be to loosen federal antitrust rules that bar colleges from sharing price data. If colleges shared aid awards with their rivals, they could potentially end the merit-aid bidding wars.

3. Standardize the three-year bachelor’s degree

Henry Dunster, Harvard’s first president, altered the course of collegiate history in 1652 when his Harvard Corporation lengthened the time required for a bachelor’s degree from three years to four.

Now there is a movement to shorten it back to three.

Several prominent colleges have launched three-year degrees in the past few years, promising students all the richness of a college education in shorter time and at lower cost.

The flagship University of Massachusetts Amherst became a high-profile exemplar of the trend this fall, offering three-year degrees in economics, music and sociology in a pilot program. It’s tailored to students who have Advanced Placement credits and are willing to take summer school. The potential savings: at least \$15,000 in tuition, fees and living expenses.

Other new programs are becoming almost too numerous to list: Hartwick College in New York. Chatham University in Pittsburgh. The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

“Education should never be a one-size-fits-all enterprise,” said Margaret Drugovich, president of Hartwick.

New University of Virginia President Teresa Sullivan has proposed a three-plus-one program, giving students a bachelor’s degree in three years and a master’s in four, at significant savings.

“The parents I’ve talked to like it a lot,” Sullivan said.

American University will launch its first three-year degree this fall, in international service. At the University of the District of Columbia, President Allen Ses-

soms proposes what amounts to a two-year degree for some District high school students, who would effectively start college in their junior year. Rhode Island lawmakers in 2009 mandated a three-year option at the state's four-year colleges.

Powerful forces are driving the change. One is the rise of college-level coursework in high school: The AP program has tripled in size in little over a decade.

Another factor is the 2008 recession, which compelled colleges to find ways to lower their price. A third is the rise of for-profit colleges and online study, forces that have liberated students to take classes when and where they please.

The share of students who complete college in three years is already rising, from 1 percent in 1998 to 2.5 percent in 2006, according to the most recent federal data.

But few colleges have recognized the three-year degree as an official goal or have done much to help students attain it.

"If you're running a school, it's in your interest to keep them there for four years," said Stephen Trachtenberg, president emeritus of George Washington University. "And five years is even better."

Critics say a three-year degree would disrupt the classic model of liberal education, leaving students too busy to reap the benefits of campus life. Even four or more years of college often fail to produce literate adults. Federal data from 2003 rated 31 percent of college graduates "proficient" in reading prose.

Some reformers say the goal should be to deliver an advanced degree in four or five years, rather than a bachelor's in three, for a select population of students capable of acceleration. A growing number of universities, including Georgetown, GW, Marymount, Howard and U-Va., already offer accelerated master's degrees.

"People are going to need to continue their education," Trachtenberg said, "whether they do a BA in four years or three

years."

4. Revive the core curriculum

Generations of Americans went to college to learn a common core of human knowledge: Plato's "Republic." Darwin's "Origin of Species." "The Iliad" and "The Odyssey." The rise and fall of Greece and Rome. Enough Latin to read the school motto and enough Shakespeare to drop quotes at cocktail parties.

The core curriculum all but perished in the 1960s, under assault by several converging trends: a rising consumer mentality among students, the evolution of college professors from educators into researchers pursuing ever-narrower specialties, the expanding global knowledge base and a changing academic culture that looked beyond the teachings of dead white men.

Today, only a handful of prominent institutions -- including Boston and Columbia universities, the University of Chicago and quirky St. John's College -- attempt to teach students the fundamentals of their intellectual heritage.

"The first two years, we want kids to follow our program. And we've spent decades working on this, fighting about it," said John Boyer, dean of the College at the University of Chicago.

To ask whether the core curriculum should be revived is really to ask why students go to college: Is it to learn essential knowledge, such as Shakespeare and Milton, or essential skills, such as how to think critically and engage with the world?

Advocates of the core curriculum say the academy has abdicated its responsibility to prioritize human knowledge. Defenders of the prevailing system say the academy's goal is to teach thought, not facts. Students are presumed to have surveyed their intellectual heritage in high school.

The prevailing model of "general education" requires students to take one or two courses each in several broad academic fields, such as cultural studies, quantitative reasoning and natural science.

Course choices can number in the hundreds.

Students are free to pursue their own itinerary of essential knowledge. Many students satisfy "distribution requirements" with uninspired survey courses or with courses too esoteric or peripheral to rate as essential. At the University of Maryland, for example, students may satisfy their Social Sciences and History requirement with courses on the history of sexuality, advertising or sports.

"It's an educational program with neither design nor purpose," said Robert Zemsky, a higher education scholar at the University of Pennsylvania.

College presidents say they cannot get faculty committees to agree on what a core curriculum should include -- or, more precisely, what it should exclude. Academic departments have grown siloed and competitive; in curricular decisions, no one wants to be left out.

There's broad agreement that the general education system is flawed, and some presidents are calling for stronger core requirements. The American Council of Trustees and Alumni in Washington has led the campaign; its 2010 report *What Will They Learn?* gives Harvard a D and Yale an F for failing to require such basic subjects as mathematics and U.S. history.

The core may be making a modest comeback. A growing number of colleges are building required courses and texts into new first-year experience programs, senior "capstone" projects, honors colleges and other school-within-a-school initiatives.

A core curriculum does not necessarily mean dead white men. The new first-year program at Trinity Washington University, a majority-black women's college, might ask students to read Toni Morrison or Alice Walker en masse, said Patricia McGuire, Trinity's president.

"Now, that doesn't mean we don't also read Shakespeare," she said.

5. Bring back homework

These days, the best years of our lives are also some of the easiest.

Research shows that the average time college students spend on homework has fallen by nearly half in 50 years, from about 25 hours a week in 1961 to 15 hours today. College used to match the pace and rigor of a full-time job; today, it looks more like a part-time job.

Students don't work as hard because they don't have to. The overall collegiate grade-point average has risen in the past half-century by half a point, from roughly 2.5, midway between a C and a B, to just over 3.0, a solid B.

Both trends hold true across public and private institutions of greater and lesser selectivity. Grade inflation became so pronounced that in 2004, Princeton leaders decreed that no more than 35 percent of undergraduate grades could be A's.

Some experts have suggested students are getting better grades because they are smarter, as evidenced by rising SAT averages at selective schools. But researchers say the SAT cannot wholly explain the rise.

There's mounting evidence that less study means less learning. An influential new book, "Academically Adrift," uses data from the Collegiate Learning Assessment to suggest that 36 percent of students make no significant learning gains in college.

Students may spend less time studying because more of them hold real jobs. Another factor is technology: It is quicker to research and write a term paper with an Internet-connected laptop than with a typewriter and a stack of reference books. But most of the decrease in study time occurred in the 1960s and 1970s, before the personal computer age.

There is another theory. Over the decades, the quality of classroom teaching has counted ever less toward a professor's career trajectory, while the quantity and quality of research output have counted ever more.

Research "may be draw-

ing faculty away from assigning work," said Alexander McCormick, whose National Survey of Student Engagement has yielded some of the best data on study time. "If I assign students a lot of papers, I have to grade them."

The rising consumer culture of college in the 1970s created new incentives for professors to go easy on students. Consider the modern course evaluation, a tool that consistently punishes -- with low ratings -- professors who assign lots of homework or give low grades.

Some researchers liken the current climate to a mutual non-aggression pact between faculty members and students. "Each one says, 'I won't ask too much of you if you don't ask too much of me,'" McCormick said.

The general rule in higher ed is that students ought to expend two hours of study for every hour of class time. Fifteen hours of weekly class time would spawn 30 hours of homework, or 45 weekly hours of total study time. Students approached those numbers in 1960. Today, the ratio is closer to 1:1.

Faculties could boost rigor simply by assigning more homework. Colleges also could promote "high-effort" practices across the curriculum, such as challenging freshman seminars, writing-intensive courses, undergraduate research assignments, service learning and long-term "capstone" projects. Research links these "best practices" to higher retention and stronger performance on learning assessments.

"The more students do these, the more they stay in school, and the better they do on measures of their actual learning outcomes," said Carol Geary Schneider, president of the Association of American Colleges and Universities.

6. Tie public funds to finishing college

In 2009, President Obama invoked Sputnik-era patriotic angst in announcing his American Graduation Initiative, an agenda targeting community colleges but with the broader purpose of regaining the world lead in college comple-

tion by 2020.

The Obama initiative arrived amid a veritable wave of college-completion goal-setting: philanthropy heavyweight the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation in 2008 pledged hundreds of millions of dollars to double the number of low-income students who complete degrees or credentials. The Lumina Foundation that year proposed 60 percent completion by 2025. Several other nonprofits and industry associations have weighed in.

The notion that most Americans should finish college is comparatively new. As recently as 1970, 11 percent of adults held bachelor's degrees and barely half had finished high school.

Newer still is the pervasive societal fear that we have lost the world lead in college completion. A 2010 report by the nonprofit College Board shows America ranking 12th among 36 industrialized countries in the share of young adults, 40 percent, who hold at least an associate degree. Canada is the nation to beat, at 56 percent.

Catching Canada may be the least of our worries. A new wave of data and research, triggered by a change in federal law, has unearthed alarming disparities in college completion among students of different racial and ethnic groups.

The latest data show 60 percent of whites, 49 percent of Hispanics and 40 percent of blacks seeking bachelor's degrees attain them within six years of enrollment. The overall six-year graduation rate is 57 percent.

College completion already tops 60 percent in the more privileged sectors of higher education, including nonprofit four-year colleges and the more selective public colleges. Policy leaders have naturally turned to the groups with the lowest rates of success. In public community colleges, the Obama administration's focus, fewer than 30 percent complete associate degrees or credential programs. (Finishing any postsecondary program counts toward the national goal.) Among Hispanics, the fastest-growing racial or ethnic category

in higher education, only one-fifth of adults hold degrees.

The Hispanic Scholarship Fund has set a goal that someone in every Hispanic household hold a degree. The Gates Foundation and Obama administration have thrown their weight behind community colleges, where new approaches could yield the 5 million new community college graduates the president seeks.

Several groups have collected examples of “best practices” ripe for replication. Schools with high minority completion tend to track students relentlessly from enrollment to graduation, with reams of data and an “intrusive” brand of academic counseling.

“You really have to start paying attention to these students before they enroll, and you don’t stop paying attention to them until you hand them their diploma,” said Kevin Carey, policy director of the think tank Education Sector.

That may not be enough. Jamie Merisotis, chief executive of Lumina, suggests that at least 10 percent of public funding to colleges be awarded on the basis of completion, particularly among low-income, minority, adult and first-generation students. States typically fund public colleges based on who enrolls, not who graduates.

Accreditors, the chief accountability agents in higher education, could also pressure schools to address graduation disparities, said Kati Haycock, president of the Education Trust.

“There frankly are no real consequences for colleges right now that large numbers of their students don’t make it,” she said.

7. Cap athletic subsidies

Intercollegiate athletics undoubtedly add to the collegiate experience. But how much, and for whom?

Nine public universities in Virginia charged students more than \$1,000 apiece in athletic fees this school year to cover the costs of their programs. The average fee has nearly doubled in 10 years.

Athletic costs are soaring as

universities race to build bigger programs with higher profiles. A nationally televised football team is a mighty tool for extracting money from alumni and applications from wealthy out-of-state students.

Critics say the top division of the nonprofit National Collegiate Athletic Association increasingly resembles for-profit entertainment, with million-dollar coaches and ever-lengthening seasons. Some schools have only a small percentage of students engaged in athletics, and athletes only nominally engaged in education.

“You’re not providing students with the opportunity to play sports. You’re bringing students in to pay money to watch sports,” said Margaret Miller, a professor in the Center for the Study of Higher Education at the University of Virginia.

Ninety-seven schools in the Football Bowl Subdivision spent an average \$84,446 per athlete on their athletic programs in 2008, while spending \$13,349 per student on academics, according to a 2010 report by the Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics.

The notion of a profitable athletic program is largely a myth. A 2010 analysis of 99 public bowl-subdivision schools by the Center for College Affordability and Productivity, a Washington think tank, found 13 that broke even without subsidies. That analysis found the average athletic “tax,” mostly levied in added tuition or fees, increased from \$395 per student in the 2004-05 academic year to \$506 in 2008-09 among those schools.

“Institutions are paying coaches these astronomical salaries ... and, for the most part, drawing down dollars that could go into the academic enterprise,” said William E. “Brit” Kirwan, chancellor of the University System of Maryland and former president of the flagship state university. “And, let’s face it, College Park is one of them.”

Just-departed U-Md. football coach Ralph Friedgen earned about \$2 million a year, more than

any public university president.

Most colleges operate outside the bowl system, with smaller programs tailored for scholar-athletes who compete for love of the game.

But although such programs cost less, they also earn less. That means higher athletic fees. Schools with wealthy donors, including U-Va. offset the fees with private funds. Less affluent schools can’t. Ninety-five percent of revenue in the Christopher Newport University athletic program comes from fees, which total \$1,147 per student.

Athletic spending follows a similar pattern at private institutions, where it is not a matter of public record.

Some reformers say colleges would moderate their own spending if the costs were publicized widely. A 2010 report by USA Today included a searchable database of programs.

Others suggest that states could bar public colleges from supporting athletic programs with subsidies that total more than 5 percent of tuition revenue. (The average among bowl-subdivision schools is 8 percent.) Or, Congress could intervene.

For Kirwan and others, the biggest problem is the bowl system, an annual championship ritual that concentrates hundreds of millions of dollars within a small group of schools. Many sports fans, including President Obama, suggest ditching the bowl system in favor of traditional playoffs, with revenue shared equally by all.

8. Stop re-teaching high school in community college

A staggering statistic: Three-fifths of students who enter community college out of high school are placed into remedial study, where they are re-taught all the English or math they should have learned in high school. So-called developmental courses confer no college credit and can postpone actual collegiate study by a year or more. Less than one-quarter of students who enter developmental education have completed degrees eight years later.

Remediation is a pedagogical bottleneck, and it's a key reason that less than half of all community college students ever finish their studies.

"What we do know is the current model is desperately broken," said Mark Milliron, deputy director for postsecondary improvement at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, which has pledged hundreds of millions of dollars to reform community colleges.

One obvious target for reformers is the placement system. Most students take a broad test of reading and math skills and, based on their score, are either cleared for collegiate study or sidetracked into remediation.

Placement tests are not diagnostic: "They don't tell you what, specifically, you need remediation in," said Robert Templin, president of Northern Virginia Community College. Remedial students waste precious time re-learning what they already know.

Remedial courses are comprehensive, lengthy and dull, covering "essentially what you should have learned in high school math and English, but taught twice as fast, in a lecture format," said Davis Jenkins, a senior researcher at the Community College Research Center at Teachers College, Columbia University.

Dozens of colleges, including NVCC, are experimenting with a new approach to placement, one that diagnoses specific areas of weakness for each student. Some schools are also tinkering with the definition of college readiness: a humanities major might not need the same math skills as a future engineer.

Such details wouldn't matter much under the old lecture-hall approach. But a new generation of online education programs enable colleges to design custom lessons for each student.

Both NVCC and Montgomery College are piloting variants of the "math emporium" model, named for a successful initiative at Virginia Tech. It allows students to learn only the math they need and at their own pace, with instructors

available to help.

"Instead of a student sitting in a class for seven weeks waiting for what they need to know, they walk right into that material," said DeRionne Pollard, the new president of Montgomery College.

Research on 13 emporium-style math courses showed student pass rates rose by one-half, compared with traditional remediation, and instructional costs fell by about one-third. Templin said the model can reduce the duration of remedial study from a year to a few weeks, with a corresponding boost to completion.

Other initiatives attempt to combine remediation with college-level study, so that remedial students don't fall further behind. One, called the Accelerated Learning Program and piloted at the Community College of Baltimore County, "mainstreams" developmental students into college-level courses along with companion classes that provide extra help. Others embed remediation within college-level courses.

Such programs rescue students from the drudgery of dead-end remediation, Milliron said, by combining it "with what they came to college to do in the first place."